



GM NOTEBOOK ISSUE NINETEEN

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Welcome, Patrons!

This month marks the end of the amazing space voyage we called Nebula Jazz and while I'm sad to see it head off into unknown territories, I'm excited that in its place we'll be starting up a new show using the Stars Without Number ruleset. We don't have a cast or a name yet, but in this issue I've shared a page from my notes outlining some ideas I've been tossing around. This month also saw the Live Live Show for Court of Swords - our third in that campaign so far. I hope you had a chance to watch, and that the contents of the zine will give you some new context for that whole thing and for the campaign to come. Hopefully, in future issues we'll see some input from our BRAND NEW GM Jesse Cox, who'll be starting a new campaign soon as well!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 19 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel RollPlay GM



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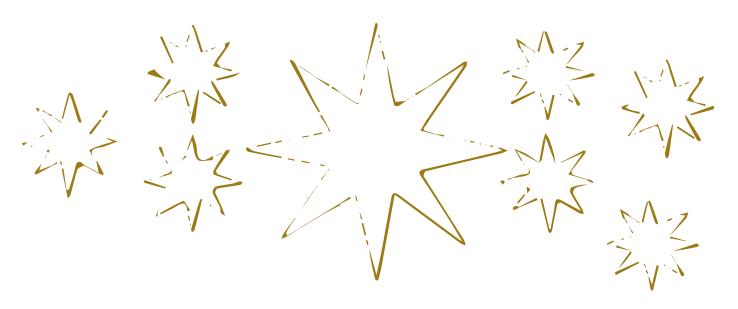
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Court of Swords:

Stranger Stars



The episodes of Court of Swords stretching from Zeke's arrival on the show until the current episode (at the time of writing this) have been about the slow climb towards some deeper resolution of the previous arc. Prior to now, to the arc I'm calling "Stranger Stars" the characters had been caught in the shadow of the Tower - their fates bound to that dark obelisk whose mythologies portend destruction and doom. Suffering and loss for the sake of future growth. As many members of the audience have noticed, bad things happen to the characters pretty consistently - turns out even when you work for

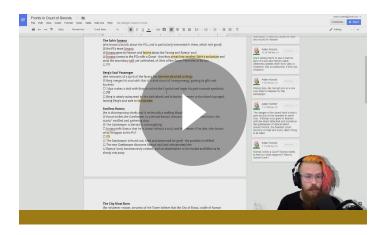
the Sign of Doom, you end up taking a couple of hits along the way. As with all dark nights, the sun's bound to come up eventually, but for our heroes, first there are stars.

What struck me right away with Zeke's new character, Kalimat, was that he was this optimistic seeker - he wasn't someone who would likely be bound to the darkness that had consumed Ramus and Berg. I wondered to myself if he might be a vector to move them from the dark shadow of the Tower into the next phase of the campaign, into the house of the Star. The Star is all about the

return from darkness - hope and joy returning to the world after the Tower's storm has passed.

We're in the storm, now - what might either be the last test of the Tower before some retribution and momentum is made or what might drag Kalimat down into the darkness with the others. The fate of the City of Brass hangs in the balance!

Prior to the Live Live show, I did some prep:



and made some notes, reproduced here for your amusement. I've done some minor updates to reflect the actions of the campaign so far. Take a look into the potential future of the Brass City, Jewel of the Court of Wands...

Stranger Stars Fall

The City of Brass is under siege by an invading force, who, while small, is powerful and invisible to the eyes of the gods - only the ripples of their actions and their invisibility to magical sight make them perceivable.

The Armada of the Scorched Earth, an army of gods and mortal servants primarily of the Tower (also some of the other Arcana, who though?) have decided the City must burn before it falls into enemy hands. They're ba-

sically murdering, torching and destroying anything that might be of value, under the idea that all things return to heaven and that killing someone now saves their soul if not their body. Pretty much just doing Tower stuff.

The Immortals, alongside their divine and mortal allies (the Devil, some others) are defending the city both from the Farang and the Armada, because it's their home, their reason for being, and because they're, ultimately, not enlightened enough to let go.

The Mara and their slippery servants are dancing in the bloodshed, usurping everyone's rule and playing in the ashes.

Factions: The Armada

Hazan tells the PCs they still work for the Tower and the Tower is about destruction. If they choose this path, it's about chaos, killing, burning and destroying so that the Farang cannot take what belongs to heaven. "Kill 'em all and let the Bureaucracy sort 'em out" At some point, Assassination mission against the Immortals, which will sink the city into the end.

The Immortals

Save what can be saved, defeat the foe, repel or convince the Armada to cease their destruction. A challenging path, but the most traditionally "heroic" even though technically the Immortals are abominations. The

Sisyphus objective, because it's not just one uphill battle but like, three.

The Farang

The "Gold Faction"

The PCs somehow align themselves, possibly through Kalimat meeting with the Scout and being rewarded for his freeing him from the Oubliette. In this ending, they betray the Fountain, the Tower and everything else in favour of eventually storming heaven and that's our next arc?

Gods help us.

The Silver Faction

The Tulpa gives Berg and the party tools to fight the Farang, not because he disagrees with them overall, but because he wants to be the one to access heaven for his side of the Farang Civil War. (this option piggybacks on other options - Tulpa wants access to heaven and sees helping Berg as the best way)

The Mara

The Mara aren't a single unified force - they want generally to feed the destruction to create misery, fear and terror so that the strong become the weak and they can access power and influence. They can offer many things to turn the tables but of course there is a price. In this choice, the Mara end up corrupting one of the Immortals, giving them a foothold

on the city - potentially ending with the City of Brass becoming a Mara-powered helltropolis, capital of the Court of the Void.

Countdown to Destruction

The Armada

☑ Guerilla v	warfare	against	the	Immorta	ls
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☑ Strategic targ	gets - temple:	s, barracl	ks, mis-
cellaneous and	confusing-b	out-fate-r	elevant
targets are dest	royed by age	nts of the	Tower

□ the	city-wide magical transportation sy	ys-
tem is	irreparably damaged by an attack	

□ The A'harisa	are	routed,	its	commanders
killed				

\square The Palace of the	Immortals	is burned,	the
Immortals killed			

$$\square$$
 The City of Brass burns, utterly destroyed

The Immortals

☐ Inanna and several other Sahir are recruit-
ed to develop techniques to fight the Farang

\square A method to allow	magic to	affect t	the Fa-
rang forces is develop	ped		

☐ The Anathem Network is destroyed, driv-
ing the Farang back into the aura of the Zig-
gurat

	A	peace	is	brokered	with	the	Armada	of
the	2 S	corche	he	Farth				

 \Box The Battle of the Golden Ziggurat is fought and won by the Immortal forces

 \Box The Farang are repelled back to whence they came, and the city is saved



The Gold Faction Farang

☑ The Invasion begins with the lower districts, and the Anathem Network is erected ☐ Several Sahir switch sides and begin working with the Farang ☐ The Farang seize the Marketplace ☐ The Farang seize the Temple of the World ☐ The Farang seize the Palace of the Immortals ☐ The Armada and other divine entities in the City abandon it and return to Heaven ☐ The City is captured, and the Farang begin attempting to pierce the gates of Heaven The Mara ☑ Those who suffer most from the battles are turned from their fate ☑ The lower districts begin breeding devils and abominations ☐ The Aharisa becomes corrupted, necromantic magic turning them into a Mara-fuelled genocide squad ☐ The Farang are repelled but the Armada and Immortal defense plans are irreparably derailed ☐ The divine entities that still remain in the city flee for Heaven's safety ☐ The Mara strike at the weakened Immortals, corrupting them and taking the City for their own

What if They Just Leave?

If the players just see the city in flames and decide "nah bb we out" then what happens?

Some options:

- The Armada and the Immortals end up fighting each other and cancelling each others' efforts
- The Farang seize a significant portion of the city, and their network grows
- Eventually the Armada and the Immortals make nice, and the remaining Sahir give them the tools to fight the Farang but not repel them
- The city becomes a kind of cold war zone, ala Berlin, where the Farang claim the lower city and Heaven claims the upper
- Ongoing skirmishes for the foreseeable future
- The Mara fester in the shadows, growing powerful and continuing the chaos
- The City becomes the first beachhead for the Gold Faction Farang, who begin drawing plans for future invasion.

Questions Left Unanswered?

Q: What about the Angel that was allied with the Annepire back before Sali and Kalimat showed up?

A: He represents a shadow council of angels, gods and other heavenly bureaucrats who want to avoid the Fountain absorbing everything forever - they want to live!

Q: What about Kukrit?

A: Old Kooky is an unwitting pawn of the Mara, who want him to turn Ramus and Berg against each other because it's funny.

Q: Where are the servants of Imix?

A: A dedicated but small cult of Imix worshippers, the Sons and Daughters of the Cinder Lord, exist and serve in the City of Brass. They will side with the Tower when the time comes, as the Tower gives the City a chance to burn so bright.

Q: What happened to the Fifth Guest?

A: Walida Silversmith is a Dragonborn Sorceress who crossed the Immortals and was sentenced to death - she is wanted by the Aharisa for her crimes but returns to the city and sides with no faction - she's here for herself. She wants to reclaim what the Immortals took from her (mostly magical stuff) and then leave for the Court of Swords where she can study the Mara.

Q: What's the deal with the stairway to heaven?

A: The Shadowy Council of Shadowy Angels built it as a backdoor to Heaven, it might fall into the hands of any of the Factions in the Battle for the City of Brass but it might also just go unnoticed.

The Anathem Network

Inside the network, no magic based on the Fountain can function. Period. If someone dies inside the network their soul remains in their body until it leaves the network or until the Farang find a way to start siphoning souls for their horrible engines.

Outside the network, all Farang carry an innate resistance to all magic damage and gain advantage on all magic saves. This is inherent to their nature, and normally they would be totally immune except that the Fountain's bullshit energy is everywhere and overloading their "circuits".

Until the Sahir are able to create arcane protocols to modify magic - prayer strips that can be included in spellcasting to allow magic to function. If these are used against the Farang, magic is treated as normal. If they're used inside the Network, resistance and advantage apply but magic functions.

Each prayer strip acts as a single-use magic spell component, consumed by the spell when cast. They're available to allies of the Immortals at first, or the Armada once the two factions align.



Encounters

Gold Faction Marauders

Either inside the Anathem Network or at the vanguard, a group of golden-clad Farang warriors run afoul of the PCs. This is dangerous as heck, as they have magic resistance and also are very scary.

- For the Armored Incursion Units, use Gold Dragon Wyrmlings and Young Gold Dragons
- Replace their Fire damage with Psychic

For unarmored Farang, just use the various Elves of the MM or Volos or Humanoid NPCs but with Elf traits.

Forces of the Armada

The Armada employs a rag-tag group of priests of the Tower and some other gods, plus human mercenaries, monsters, and various creatures. Honestly, you can just roll randomly. That might be fun.

Some specific encounters can be found in the Armada countdown - either the PCS are part

of it, and fighting the Immortals or they're Immortals trying to stop it. Build accordingly.

Immortal Defenders

The Immortals employ hidebound troops wanting to save the city - these are the idealists, the status quo combatants and the city troops themselves. Primarily we're looking at humanoid defenders - use characters with class levels like Priest, Knight, etc.

They probably have some divine entities on their side so take a look at the Celestial options as well. The Devil sends his angels to protect the city, of course.

Magical constructs! They're rad! Use them.

The Mara

Demons, aberrations, criminals, the downtrodden and whatever scum seeps up from the lower district sewers.

As well, definitely introduce some encounters with Immortal or Armada loyalists who are actually enemies of the PCs, secretly corrupted by the Mara's dark magic.

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Court of Swords:

Goals and Quests v2

I've done some revising of the Goals & Quests model of experience in Court of Swords, for 5th Edition D&D. The main changes are that Goals are worth two times a standard single-character encounter in XP for a character of their level, a Quest is worth three times the divided experience of a multiple-character encounter and pursuit of a goal is worth 50x the character's level per session, so long as at least a single roll was made during pursuit. I've edited the revised version of the rules here, feel free to use them at your own table and let me know what you think!

For anyone who is using this model, or honestly just playing 5e at all, I've found *Kobold Fight Club* immeasurably useful in calculating goals and quests XP.

Goal-Based Experience

No more encounter based XP - if you fight something for no reason, you're not rewarded for it.

Goal and Quest based XP - a goal is a player-set objective, a quest is an NPC or Faction-set objective. Goals apply to individual PCs, Quests apply to the entire group.

Each character has three Goal Slots, which can be filled with a Goal to be achieved. Such as;

- "Find out more about the nature of Tulpa."
- "Speak to a representative of the Tower about their goals."
- "Find out what the prisoner in the Oubliette was."



The DM assesses the difficulty of the goal, and assigns it a category; "Medium, Hard or Deadly" based on narrative likelihood they'll succeed, obstacles in the way, etc. This choice is admittedly quite fiat oriented, but without non-combat assessment, the narrative is the best tool here. Take your best guess, the difference isn't huge.

Category of the goal is equated to an XP value. Achieving the goal means getting the XP.

GOALS: XP values are Encounter Difficulty*2 in XP value

QUESTS: XP values are Encounter Difficulty*3 in XP value

For example, a Medium Goal for a level 5 character is worth 1000xp and a Hard Quest for a group of four level 5 characters is worth 2250xp.

Same goes for Quests, save that the difficulty is similarly adjusted and the source is external.

 "Go to the Tower of Hell's Fury and Kick the Wizard in his Butt"

Pursuing a Goal but not accomplishing that goal in the session nets a character their level x 50xp, so long as they made a roll in which something meaningful was at stake in pursuit.

Goals can be changed at the end of the session or abandoned at any time.

If a goal is resolved during a session, you don't just get to write a new one to fill the gap.

THE POINT: the players now have a method for telling the DM what they want in the

game and mechanically invest the players via their characters in the game itself

ROLLS 4 GOALS: A goal cannot be accomplished if no mechanism is engaged. This is to prevent players from farming goals off one another and to remind and encourage us to use the game systems we have available. Even a single roll will suffice to qualify a goal for XP.

Example Player Goals:

Berg (Level 7)

- Find out why bad things keep happening to me (Deadly)
- Find out more about the nature of Tulpa (Medium)
- Ensure the safety of the child (Hard)

Ramus (Level 7)

- Find out why Heaven's not answering (Medium)

- Find out about Tulpa or the Elves from the City of Brass (Medium)
- Speak to a representative of the Tower about their goals (Medium)

Salihafa (Level 6)

- Study the Bracer and the Rod (Medium)
- Understand a spell of Ramus' at a core level (Medium)
- Convince the Tower and the Immortals to work together against the Farang (Deadly)

Kalimat (Level 6)

- Find out what the prisoner in the Oubliette was (Hard)
- Find the prisoner again (Hard)
- Learn the importance of this strange child (Medium)

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Farewell, Nebula Jazz

After 30 episodes this month the crew of Nebula Jazz bid one last farewell to the stars as the show came to a conclusion. We've been playing Fate Accelerated and doing the space weirdness thing for thirteen months, as of the writing of this issue, and being able to put a conclusive end to the season and to the show itself feels real good. I often say that once you've got players, it's the easiest thing in the world to start a campaign – everyone is full of excitement and energy, you have brand new characters you can use to explore a whole new narrative and

world together, and the hype levels are high. Making a meaningful campaign out of that energy is a little harder - once the honeymoon of character creation is over, it's about buckling down and digging into what makes the world memorable, what drives the characters and what's exciting from session to session. What's hard though, is ending a game. Finishing a campaign in a way that feels like it does justice to the potentially hundreds of hours you've put in can be a remarkable challenge, and I've talked about it more generally before, but I wanted to put to-



gether a few words that speak to ending the campaign that Jesse, Dodger, Sam, Pokket and I ran for so long.

In some games we've started strong and our enthusiasm fizzled out because we. as one might imagine, discovered the nuances and details that prove the system not to be as good a fit as we'd hoped. Thankfully, Fate proved itself out. Originally, I was a bit wary about using Fate - Fate Core hadn't appealed to me on account of the (perceived on my part) lack of serious consequence for player failure and the flatness of the curve (4df tends towards zero, which can be a little unexciting at the table) but I took a chance on Fate Accelerated because I think it let us focus on the most important part of the game - the Aspects. Being able to lay out precisely what your character is about in fairly loose terms gave us a lot of freedom to build not only the characters but the world they lived in. Leaving some Aspects blank is something I would absolutely suggest to groups who are doing world creation together. Starting with a core concept, a trouble aspect and something to add a little extra flavour is more than enough and giving the players two aspects to "discover" along the way can be really freeing. That's how we end up with Hacker Jackers. The open space nature of the game and the way all the players get to influence and nudge each other makes Fate perfect for the kind of improvisational layering narrative that we were going for with Nebula Jazz. I wouldn't suggest it to GMs who want to come to the table with a setting and concepts fully formed from the get go - in my experience it befits a certain kind of experience best.



I think I was lucky that my players were already ready for a heavily improvised game (Jesse) or were able to adapt and expand to fill the space in their own unique ways as we went along (everyone else). It was really great to use a system that I knew Jesse would get some improvisational mileage out of - being able to turn his goofs, like the Blixnort, into real in-game stuff felt really great. I have a feeling this might be a system that Geoff Robinson would have a good time with they're both that kind of player. For Sam, as the campaign progressed I could see him developing a narrative voice above and beyond his character - something I tried to encourage when it came up. More than any other player, he was the one who wanted to use compels to create scenes and then to narrate them as they went along. He shouldered a great deal of the GMing burden in some moments, and they were always a delight to watch. The focus on character that Fate brings to the table, the open-ended descriptive stats and Aspects really helped bring Pokket to a better understanding of characterisation. I think. I could tell that with both Aurora and Luna she was paying close attention to what was going on in the game and making adjustments mechanically and narratively to her play to better fit what she thought of her character. Fate gave her room to experiment in a way that something like, say, D&D might not, inherently. What was great about Dodger's play was that in both seasons, her character acted as a sort of reflection or foil - Eugene was both the weirdest character but also the most grounded - when the rest of the cast were off with strange plots, our



slime boy was there to speak for us as an audience. When we needed something to ground the narrative of season 2, I knew that I could rely on Dodger to play Artemis as the center of attention without faltering. Dodger is the kind of player I have come to trust with important stuff, and to express her boundaries around that responsibility with me. It's good to have mechanisms to facilitate that authority movement between players and the GM, or between players. Fate did us a solid in that regard.

I can honestly say that the game did things I didn't predict, that every session went somewhere I didn't think it would and that as a whole, I could never have known what Nebula Jazz was going to give us, in the end. For that, I'm incredibly thankful - I play roleplaying games to find out what happens, and Nebula Jazz never once gave me what I expected. I hope you enjoyed it, and that it inspired you to try playing a game that isn't just a little off the rails, but is so far out there that you can't even see the rails anymore.

Mirrorshades, Contid Mr. Johnson: pay is 500x / day plus expenses, a modicum of class is required, no heavy armour, no assault weapons - obey the law. Dress nice. Be professional. Hadiyah's Schedule Thursday, August 11th 4LZ 10:00am acrive SEA-TAC airport (PROTEST) 11:00am check in & Sheraton Downtown 2:00pm deliver live interview for Magnire Magazine (interviewer Dmitri Chernayer) 6: 00 pm dinner with Lisa Sephora, Dean of Spirit Studies, UWash (reservations at The Edge) (FOLLOW (THECATEN) Poison 9:00am breakfast w/ Hannah Red-Arrow (MetaBest BBS) Friday, August 12th; (reservations & the Grey Line) 12:00pm lunch with local metahuman community leaders (& U wash) 3:00pm symposium on Metahumans and Magic (BOMB THREAT) 7: oopm dinner at Purple Haze (Poison by Silver) 8:30 pm gala at same (ATTACK ON THE WAY HOME) Saturday, August 13th: schedule free for sight-seeing (ATTACK) (by spirit!) 10:002m Volunteer prep @ Redmond School for Awakened Youth Sunday, August 74th 12 copm lunch & Ork Outrosch Conter (ATTACK BY GANG) 4:00pm meeting with Kazuhiro Moto of Fuchi Medical 8: oopm dinner @ the Hotel w/ Sharon Ng of UCAS Department of Majic Mana bolt 581 Monday, August 15th: 7:00am flight & SEA-TAC Opposition · the Humanis Policlub has sourcel plans to assault Hadiyah. They escalate. Policlub Goon; B: 4 Q: 4 S: 4 Skills: BKe 3 Car 3 Demo 4 Ethquette (street) 3 Firedims 4 C: 2 1: 2 W. 4 Gear: Uz. TII, Clip 16/Corred 4/ 4M3 w/ Gas Vent 2 Armor Vest 2/1 F: 6 M: 0 2:3 B: 3 Q: 3 5: 2 Skills: Society 5 Conjucion 5 Freezews 3 Policlub Mage: Spells: Mana Bolt 5, Fireball 4, Combat Sense 3, Control Actions 3 C: 4 1: 3 W: 5 Masic Post 6 E: 6 M: 6 R: 3 Gesc: Uzi III (Clip 16, Concest 4 443 Cas Vent 2) Armor Vest 2/1 Disassemblers Skills: Car 3, Armed 5, Demo 3, Firedrins 5 B: 7 Q: 4 5: 6 Ork Ganger: Gear: Ax97 (Clip 22, Conceal 3, 4M3) C: 1 1. 3 W. 2 Armor Jacket (5/3) E: 6 M: 0 R: 3 End of Session: O follow a Belief? Instinct trouble? achieve a Goal? } up to 4 Karma / session (too much?) (2) workhorse + MVP + embodiment Shoutout to Anders in Sweden for staying up late.

B MIRRORSHADES NOTES COMMENTARY

MIRRORSHADES, CONT'D

This page is a whole schedule of shit that Hadiyah never got around to doing. I feel like maybe if you were a professional being guarded by other professionals this would be a pretty chill schedule and you'd be able to have a real nice four days in Seattle in the summer but not this poor lady, this poor lady got hooked up with the fine folks in Bomb Threat.

Though actually, thinking on it, I believe that name came to be during this episode - if you look at Friday, August 12th at 3:00 you'll see I've etched in red pen the words BOMB THREAT which I think originally was intended to be a bomb threat called in on the symposium but somehow it became the name of a group of Shadowrunners. I can't remember and while I could go back and watch the vod it's more fun to try and wrack my addled brain, but I feel like this one was a Kaitlyn special - the bomb threat got called in and she hijacked the name and pretended to be in a band? I don't even know, anything was possible with these shitheads.

This whole section is riddled with references to things in the SR universe I pulled out of the 1e Seattle guidebook - The Edge, the Grey Line, Purple Haze, etc. They're all "actual" restaurants and stuff from the book. It's one of my favourite old Shadowrun books, and is full of weird ads and reads like a terrible 1990s BBS about the EXCITING CITY OF THE CYBER-NETIC FUTURE which is just right for a game like Mirrorshades.

OPPOSITION

This is one of the drawbacks of Shadowrun - if you're going to go head-to-head with the PCs, you're going to need to put together stat blocks for whatever's coming their way. This can be a little bit of busy-work, but as you do it, you can kind of keep whatever you were using for later - moving a number or two around as you go. The thing is, power scaling isn't such a big deal in Shadowrun, so today's Halloweener can be tomorrow's Policlub goon without too much work. That's the thing about prep, hopefully you're able to do it as few times as possible and get on with the good stuff.

END OF SESSION

I feel like we were using this from the get-go, so I'm not sure why these notes are here, though I may just not have written them down concretely prior to this. I'm really happy with how the voting worked with the game, and the way chat got behind different characters in different arcs. Very cool to see if affect both players and audience.

SHOUTOUT TO ANDERS

I can't remember why we're giving you shoutouts, Anders, but big ups, buddy.

UNITED BUNSSIFICATION

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ROLLPLAY STARS WITHOUT NUMBER CAMPAIGN Q2 2018

That's a hell of a mouthful but hey, welcome to the very first page of proto-notes for this eventually-a-campaign. So so much is in the air right now, but i've done a tiny bit of thinking about what the game might end up looking like, along with a few notes on the potential factions and some ideas for the game.

What's going to be fun is watching all this come apart as we play seeing what the game ends up as. The cast is going to be the first big change to the ideas I might have. As I synthesize my plans and goals with theirs, we'll really see the magic start to happen.

Here's to new endeavours!

- * PCs are crew of a ship (purpose? trade | military?) owned by one of the great houses, they go where the great house tells them
- * some sort of cataclysm: mutiny, crash, etc? put them on crisis? (alternately stick to the model and don't just fuck it all up)

Military Sci-fi with hard choices about war, humanity and authority sandbox environment style play with a core purpose: defeat the foe (whoever that is)

factions (so far)

- · the guild (post-human game obsessives)
- · the houses major (three biggest houses)
- · He houses minor (the rest)
- · the [something] corporation (non-noble powerhouse)
- · the main religion (ancient earth + space ward)
- · the other, smaller religion (newer + weinder)
- · a criminal organization (the pushers, killers, etc)
- · a media conglomerate (news, entertainment, etc.)
- . 117
- . 122

The thing to figure out is who is at war with whom, for how long and over what, exactly? Is this a full fledged hot war or not? Border skirmishes, secret war, national (probably not, since "government" is likely dictated by local nobility)

Behind the Scenes: Court of Swords Live

